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ABSTRACT

A model for an integrative first-year writing class, combining American native writing, field experience, and the fundamental trappings of a composition class, are examined in this paper. Students can learn to respond to environmental issues in creative ways and explore issues that they will face in their lives. In addition to a combined field/reader response journal (presented either on-line or as hard copy), the course consists of four loose thematic sections, each requiring a paper of four to six pages that must go through a three-draft process conducted, for the most part, in the classroom. The first two weeks of class are designed to evaluate how students view the physical world. Students then explore American nature writing in groups of two or three students. A day-long field trip as well as viewing the film "Chinatown" are also a part of the course. Students also read several essays on land use and write a series of short response papers. At semester's end, students read "Double Whammy," a crime novel which is really about crimes committed against Florida's unprotected wilderness. By opening up the classroom, actually exploring the environment, the course gives students a solid educational experience, one that focuses on the out-of-doors, reading, writing, and thinking. (RS)

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Panel: Environmental Composition: Practice, Rhetoric, and Grammar

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"American Nature Writing and the Composition Classroom"

In my presentation today, I will introduce a model for an integrative first-year writing class, combining American nature writing, field experience, and the fundamental trappings of any composition class. After I describe this holistic, freewheeling class design, my colleagues, Professors Erika Archibald and Donna Gessell, will take a more focused look at particular elements of a first-year composition class that revolves around American nature writing. Professor Archibald will introduce media analysis techniques that encourage students to examine their own rhetorical constructions; Professor Gessell will present a creative approach to grammar appreciation and understanding.

As environmental issues continue to grow, students are inevitably forced to confront them. For instance, they recycle, avoid aerosols, shun those who use Pampers, and learn about the tropical

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rain forest from Sting and the harmful effects of clear cutting from Eddie Vender. These information sources, however, inadvertently trivialize the environmental movement, which points out the inherent danger in dealing with a rather popular topic like the environment in a first-year composition class: student victims of celebrity vagaries, who can produce papers entitled "The Earth, My Home" without a trace of irony. Still, the need for an environmental literature and composition course far outweighs the potential pitfalls. Students need an increased awareness of our physical world; they need to be exposed to a genre of American letters whose status is secondary at best; they need to see the inter-relatedness of environmental ideas, to explore environmental problems that promise to become more critical with each passing year; they need to come to terms with their own position in relation to the environment. Only after investigating their own connection to the physical world can students begin to understand how they can contribute to the protection of the environment or the perpetuation of existing environmental problems. Writing about things they have investigated can help focus their thoughts on the world around them and will force them to spend time articulating and building arguments for their ideas on paper. By examining environmental issues both personally and rhetorically students can take more

interest in their writing, because they will be confronting issues that will make a difference in their own lives.

As a topic, the environment is limitless, and always political. In order to gain a sense of purchase over issues ranging from the "greening" of America to the politics of greed, land management to timber industry jobs, acid rain to industrial infrastructure, or from philosophers to natural history writers, you have to throw a lot of stuff out, and reveal yourself by doing so. I lean toward writers who understand the physical world because they work it, live in it, or study it. I avoid political documents, and the writings of special interest groups, on the right or the left.

In addition to a combined field/reader response journal (presented either on-line or as hard copy), I created four loose thematic sections in my syllabus, each requiring a paper of four to six pages that must go through a three draft process conducted, for the most part, in the classroom. The first and last papers set the students free from the library; the other two require research. The four paper topics are 1) An investigation of how one views the natural world and how that view is created, 2) a definition and illustration of a selected area of environmental intellectual history, 3) an argument for or against a specific form of water use, and 4) after reading Carl Hiaasen's hyperbolic crime novel Double Whammy,

support or deny his claim that "What Florida needs is a good hurricane to wipe away some of its debris," a prescient statement made before the arrival of Hurricane Andrew. Except for this novel and a book length study of the Chesapeake Bay bioregion, all the required readings are relatively short samples from a wide variety of writers--from scientists to outlaws.

In order to underscore the fact that we are studying the physical world, I have planned for the class to take numerous walks around the campus (battlefields hold more than just civil war history) and one full day field trip. On these outings--some guided and some not--we will simply observe our environment. We will view a documentary film, Wild by Law and one feature length movie, Chinatown. From the beginning it will be my intention to expand our classroom, not only by going outdoors but also by removing myself from the head of the room; therefore, a variety of outside speakers will be an essential part of the classroom experience. For example, people from the Environmental Sciences Department, a local environmental writer, and a green activist from the Sierra Club would combine well. A class like this will only succeed with inter-departmental help and outside sources. These connections add new, distinct voices to the class, people whose points of view might find their way into student papers, a positive result of departmental

coupling. Support from members of the science faculty and naturalists from the community is a must. Students will reevaluate the way they perceive the world around us when they can meet and talk to people who know their way around the woods and the water, people who know the library and publishing circles, and people who can infect the students with their enthusiasm for specific topics.

Examining American nature writing from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Edward Abbey exposes our own intellectual and spiritual entanglements; the signposts are easy to spot: Religion, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Conservationism, Environmentalism, and the Ecology movement. In American nature writing, we confront politics, philosophy, history, art--the essentials of a humanities-based education--and some ideas on the meaning of Wallace Steven's adage: "The worst of all things is not to live in the physical world." To bring first-year students closer to a necessary understanding of the physical world, I will avoid beginning with Emerson. At first glance, he is the logical starting point because he brought new eyes and profound changes to the American attitude toward nature. However, in order to engage students immediately I will challenge their own views of the natural world, questioning how they see things.

The first two weeks of class are designed to evaluate how

students view the physical world. Some reading examples include Loren Eiseley's "The Brown Wasps," Annie Dillard's "The Fixed," and Harry Crews's "Pages From the Life of a Georgia Innocent." All three of these works ask the reader to examine how they see the natural world, and thus provide a larger context for the students to investigate how our views are shaped. It is on these general concepts that they will focus their first formal writing assignment.

The first writing assignment requires students, working both alone and with a selected peer group, to explore their own experiences with nature and to connect them to the works discussed in class. On the second day of class, students will be asked to define "nature," "wild," and "wilderness." (This idea comes from Gary Snyder's essay on these concepts in Practice of the Wild.) Student accounts will not reach Snyder's lyrical, mystical definitions, but that isn't the point. The students need to be allowed to defined these terms for themselves; that is, to start to explore the intersection between what they know and what they don't--the place where all writing begins. Rather quickly, I'll expect the students to own a first draft that explains their individual take on the physical world.

Of course all views of nature grow from somewhere. Accordingly, our next area of exploration will be a mini-history of American Nature writing, which nicely divides into seven

subsections: Religion, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Conservationism, Environmentalism, Ecology, and Eco-defense. The rational here has a dual purpose: To avoid a pedantic, lecture-driven approach to our investigation, and to involve the students in the teaching process. The class will be divided into seven groups of two or three students, each responsible for the definition and illustration of one of the subsections. Each group will be required to present its work to the whole class on the days relevant readings are assigned. For example, Jonathan Edwards and religion; Emerson and Transcendentalism; Thoreau and Romanticism; John Muir and Conservationism; Aldo Leopold and Environmentalism; Rachel Carson and Ecology; Edward Abbey and Eco-defense. Rather than present myself as the classroom deity, blathering on about Christian theology, the values of Romanticism, the argument from design, the distinction between conservationism and environmentalism, DDT, and why the irascible Abbey took to the woods with a bucket of nails, I will let the students do the leg work. Each group, of course, will need some direction; therefore, a short bibliography and a few relevant names will be provided before they hike to the library or dive into the Web. To ensure that each student in each group holds his own, the second paper assignment requires them to explain how their subsection reinforces the idea that morality ought to include the relationship of

humans to nature. My thinking here is to make sure that each group presents a different issue, and, to maximize involvement, that each student considers a shared issue; in this case, the rubbery term morality.

Working with a group is strenuous yet necessary, and the mad rush to be the best can generate healthy competition and creative approaches to each presentation. I will need to acknowledge to the class that this sort of taxonomy is somewhat restrictive but that its purpose is to establish a necessary focus on the rich variety of writing to be found in the neglected genre of American nature writing.

The next assignment demands a good deal of outside investigation and a field trip. I chose water as a topic because of our relative proximity to the Chesapeake Bay, my colleague John Committo's (Department of Environmental Studies) knowledge of pesticide influence on tidal pools, and the fact that I wanted to read Beautiful Swimmers, William Warner's charming account of the bay and the tidewater folk who make the water their livelihood. This book, a field trip, and some ancillary journalistic articles (such as those Professor Archibald will discuss) present ideas that probably contradict the financial ideals of some members of the class, who may see corporate business work as their future. Thus, our

discussions promise to be lively.

The students will also be required to include in their journals information gleaned from a day-long field trip. These entries will detail the distinctions between the various ecosystems we will observe. The field trip is designed to get the students off campus, into a city, if possible, and then into a natural environment; this, of course, moves students beyond their reading, making a lasting impression--they get muddy, wet, fill their nostrils with real smells, wonder what species of bird stands before them and what poison the smoke stacks on the horizon spew into the atmosphere. These experiences might sound insignificant, but for students who are used to dorms, dining halls, and libraries seeing a creature in its natural habitat, truly looking at a bioregion, or smelling a city landfill can provide a necessary context essential to understanding the small things we miss on a daily basis.

For example, a class from Gettysburg College could venture into Baltimore, to see first hand the attempt to repair the harbor, which suffers from industrial toxins, and then travel to the Chesapeake Bay, which remains full of natural wonders. It helps enormously to have someone along who knows the territory, who can point out subtle changes in land or along the shoreline.

In addition to experiencing water first hand, the class will read

a variety of writers who recognize water as a provider for the soul as well as the table. For example, "Sakonnet," an essay by the novelist Thomas McGuane about a return to a childhood haunt where he used to fish, which contains the memorable line, "Many years later I went back to Sakonnet on a December afternoon as a specific against the torpor of university," serves as an intellectual and spiritual mediation on the power of water. Gretel Ehrlich's essay "On Water" supplies a view of water as lucre in the American West. Wallace Stegner's lament over the eradication of the Glen Canyon and Ed Abbey's piss-and-vinegar approach to the same subject provide a nice contrast on how to deal with man's thirst and negligence. Everything would build up to Chinatown, a film that I think underscores man's lust for a resource that seems limitless, .

As a springboard into our final paper, and to give the students some shorter, ungraded writing assignments, I will use the documentary film Wild by Law, which focuses on Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall, and Howard Zahniser and their contrary notion that parts of the American wilderness should be preserved. I will assign readings, which the students must respond to in their journals, by people who take pleasure from the land for a variety of reasons: First, Wendell Berry's "The Pleasures of Eating," a challenge to the priorities of both young students and adults; he writes, "I begin with

the proposition that eating is an agricultural act. Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true." Second, John McPhee, journalism professor and staff writer for the New Yorker, whose excerpt from Basin and Range, about the rudiments of New Geology, will, I hope, lead us toward a discussion about whether or not the United States should bury its radioactive waste in the Nevada desert. Third, Gretel Ehrlich, writer and former rancher, whose poetic essay on space and surface, "The Solace of Open Spaces," which Professor Gessell will discuss in grammatical detail, is counterbalanced by her matter-of-fact appraisal of her own efforts to raise lean, clean beef. We will conclude with Gary Nabhan, writer and botanist, discussing native agriculture and wild plants; Barry Lopez, who recognizes the landscape as a shaper of history, daily life, ideas, and emotions; and, finally, we examine the land as a crucible for the poet in the work of Robert Frost, James Dickey, and Jim Harrison. With these readings, I hope to stimulate discussion in which each student can voice his own opinions about land use and misuse in a series of short response papers, dealing with anything from the economy to the Hudson River Valley School's Thomas Cole.

Except for Beautiful Swimmers, all the class readings will be short non-fiction prose. However, when planning this course I

wanted to introduce a book that the students would remember, enjoy, and link to environmental studies. Ideas came in showers: Walden, Silent Spring, Encounters With The Archdruid, Nature and the American, Wilderness and the American Mind, A Sand County Almanac, Arctic Dreams, The Immense Journey, or, for some anarchistic hi-jinx, The Monkey Wrench Gang. The possible list is almost inexhaustible. Unfortunately, reading, especially at semester's end, tends to be a large hurdle for most first-year students. So, in keeping with the eclectic nature of this class and to indulge my own love of subversion, I picked a novel from the crime section of the library, a book not genre-specific, but still a page turner, as any good novel of mayhem should be. Carl Hiaasen, who is as important to his native Florida as orange juice, perhaps more so, writes mordantly funny crime novels that are bizarre to a fault and passionately opposed to the greed and avarice that is heedlessly destroying the natural wonder of Florida. The novel I chose, Double Whammy, which deconstructs the influence of Bass fishing on an Everglades development project, has just enough death and sex to keep a crew of non-readers reading. However, what the novel is really about is crimes committed against Florida's unprotected wilderness. Carl Hiaasen hates developers even more than he hates Mickey Mouse. Hiaasen is also a columnist for the Miami Herald, in

the tradition of Jimmy Breslin and the late Mike Royko, which means that he says things to upset people, especially people connected to business and/or government. In one particular column he suggested that there was not anything wrong with Greater Miami's rampant development that a hurricane could not fix. Using Double Whammy as a resource, I will ask the students to defend or oppose Hiaasen's statement.

Our class will begin with sixteen students looking out over a restructured hillside and end with the fictional image of Skink--Hiaasen's primal hermit who lives off road kill and reads classical literature--running into the Everglades hugging Queenie, his thirty pound pet bass. Both images exemplify an expanded classroom, the use of non-traditional examples to come to terms with their world. Using fresh texts and outside resources--science faculty, environmental journalists, green activists--I want this class to be different, to help answer the perpetual undergraduate question about first-year composition class: "What good will this do me?" I want to teach students to begin to take a hard look at where they live, to enjoy themselves while they are at it, and to learn about writing by composing in a variety of forms.

A first-year composition class centered around environmental issues can be diverse and rich with possibilities. Students can learn

to respond to environmental issues in creative ways and explore issues that they will face in their lives. Because we focus on a single topic, albeit from a variety of angles, every writing assignment, including the journal, will dovetail with the others. I hope this linkage will manifest itself in the language and the ideas the students use in their later papers. Students learn about their world through writing. I cannot imagine a more important purpose for writing as a thinking tool.

By opening up the classroom, actually exploring the environment, I hope to give my students a solid educational experience, one that focuses on the out-of-doors, reading, writing, and thinking. And, as Professor Archibald will now point out, students can learn to critically engage environmental issues as they are presented in the daily press. Thank you for your attention.

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